

Prayer of thanksgiving

Words of Spirituality

by ENZO BIANCHI

This is the saving gift that inspires our thanksgiving and makes the Eucharist the church's action par excellence

In the Gospel episode of the ten men with leprosy healed by Jesus (Luke 17:11-19), we are told that to only one of them the Lord says, "Your faith has saved you" (Luke 17:19): it is the one who realizes that he has been healed and returns to thank Jesus. Christian faith is eucharistic, and only those who give thanks experience the reality of salvation - in other words, the reality of God's actions in their lives. Since faith is a personal relationship with God that embraces one's entire life, giving thanks is not just a question of saying certain prayers. Our entire existence should become thanksgiving. This is what Paul asks: "Be eucharistic!" (Colossians 3:15). As fundamental as it is, giving thanks is by no means easy! From an anthropological point of view, it is a language that is not spontaneous in young children. Giving thanks implies a sense of alterity, the crisis of our narcissism, and the ability to enter into a relationship with another, a 'you': it is only to another person that we say 'thank you!' Those who are grateful are those who have put to death their image of themselves as someone who 'owes nothing to anyone,' and who have realized that they cannot manipulate reality and other people as they please. In our relationship with God, our 'eucharistic' ability is a sign of the maturity of our faith. We give thanks when we acknowledge that 'everything is grace,' and that God's love goes before us, accompanies us, and follows us in our lives.

Thanksgiving flows naturally from the central event in Christian faith: the gift of the Son Jesus Christ that God the Father, in his immense love, has made to humanity (cf. John 3:16). This is the saving gift that inspires our thanksgiving and makes the Eucharist the church's action par excellence. "It is right to give you thanks and praise always and everywhere, all-powerful and eternal God, through Jesus Christ our Lord." These words from the preface of the Roman Missal describe Christian thanksgiving as unceasing. Since the Eucharist (and in particular the Eucharistic prayer) is the model for Christian prayer, Christians are called to make their entire life an occasion for giving thanks. As Paul says, "What do you possess that you have not received?" (1 Corinthians 4:7). The human response to God's freely-given gift is acknowledgment of the gift and gratitude. We might call even human thanksgiving a gift of God: "We owe gratitude to God for the gift of gratitude," goes a prayer in the Jewish liturgy. Giving thanks is therefore the Christian's own spiritual mode, his or her way of interacting with the world, with objects, and with others. This explains why a gesture as basic and vital as the sharing of a daily meal is always accompanied by a prayer of thanksgiving. Giving thanks to God at the beginning of a meal ('saying grace' or 'saying the blessing') is a confession of faith in which we acknowledge that both life and its meaning are a gift of God. We are granted life through the food we eat, and the meaning of life is represented by the relationships and the conviviality that unite those who have come together around the table.

In the Eucharist, life and the meaning of life are present in the person of the living Christ, who gives himself as food of eternal life and renews the relationships of communion that join the members of the assembly. When a Christian receives the gift of fullness of life in the Son, he or she responds by giving thanks for having been created and for having received the gift of faith. A traditional morning prayer says, "I adore you, my God, and I love you with all my heart. I thank you for creating me, making me a Christian, and watching over me during this night." We respond to the gift of God above all by making our own life a gift, an act of thanksgiving, a living eucharist. The prayer of thanksgiving truly is much more than our timely response to events in which we discern God's presence and action in our lives. It is an inner orientation of our existence, the exposure of our daily life to the transfiguration of the coming kingdom of God. It results in even death being transfigured and becoming an event of birth to new life. At the moment of his martyrdom, Ciprian of Carthage's last words were "Deo gratias;" John Chrysostom ended his difficult existence with the same words of thanksgiving to God; Clare of Assisi, as she took her last breath, prayed, "Thank you, Lord, for creating me." These Christians made the conclusion of their lives a Eucharist. It is true that the prayer of thanksgiving considers the past and what God has done for us; it is 'retrospective' and flows from what we remember. But this prayer is also one that opens into hope for the future, and it is a specifically Christian way of living in the present, which is itself the space in which we live.

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